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ABSTRACT

Many American colleges and universities have developed successful programs to help prepare students for the culture shock associated with living and studying overseas, but have been less effective in aiding students as they return home and experience "reverse culture shock" or the problems associated with reentry. Culture and reentry shock occur because of an individual's need to strive for internal consistency. A four-session reentry workshop, lasting 1.5 to 2 hours each, was developed for Luther College (Iowa) students. In session I, students were asked to bring photos and memorabilia of their time overseas and each in turn was given time to talk about their experiences while others in the group listened, in addition the top 10 reentry challenges were discussed; in session II, students were asked to complete a series of sentence fragments regarding the experience of returning home, then discuss the need for adapting ways of thinking and behaving to accommodate former and new perceptions; in session III, students were told to focus on how they were now perceiving their own culture; and in session IV, students reflected on personal growth and change. (Contains 11 references and 6 appendixes which outline the sessions.) (CR)

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International Study Transitions: Creating and Leading a Reentry Workshop

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Introduction

Many American colleges and universities have developed successful programs to help prepare their students for living and studying overseas and for the culture shock which many will experience as they adjust to their new environments. Unfortunately many of the same institutions have been less effective in aiding students as they return home and experience "reverse culture shock" (Adler,1976, p. 7), or the problems associated with reentry. Werkman (1980) noted "the task of readapting to the United States after living overseas is for many, the most difficult hurdle in the cycle of international living." In large part this is true because travelers do not anticipate difficulties when simply coming home, and are surprised by the sense of "lose and change" (Bennett, 1977). Perhaps the easiest means of explaining reentry adjustments is to quote Paige (1984) who explained that "culture shock is the expected confrontation with the unfamiliar, while reentry shock is the unexpected confrontation with the familiar."

Martin (1986, reprinted in LaBrack and Push 1994, p, 64) argued that there are two theoretical orientations which provide explanations which help describe the impact that reentry has on individuals. The first rests in cognitive dissonance theory, or the explanation for the discomfort which occurs when two cognitions are psychologically inconsistent (Festinger, 1957), In this instance the returnee needs to adjust to ways of thinking and behaving without the benefit of "familiar environmental cues that assist in interpreting others' behavior and guiding one's own behavior" (Martin, 1986/1994). Another explanation for the phenomenon of reentry shock has pictured the returnee as a "marginal man" who temporarily "is in transition between two cultures, for a time affiliated with the norms and values of each. The individual must choose between or compromise the two sets of values competing for his affiliation" (McGrath,1964, p. 137).

In both theoretical orientations the processes of culture and reentry shock occur because of an individual's need to strive for "internal consistency" (Martin, 1986/1994 p. 65), which is the result of encountering competing cultural systems. In an attempt to help Luther College students deal with their experiences of "reentry shock" a reentry program was developed and provided for the students in September of 1994. The reentry workshop was four sessions which lasted from 11/2 to 2 hours each. The goals for each session and the exercises which were used are presented below.

Session I

Upon returning from overseas students were notified by the International Studies Office that a "Coming Home" workshop was being offered, and they were asked to indicate if they would like to participate. Students who indicated that they were coming were asked to bring photographs or other memorabilia representing significant aspects of their time

overseas. Following some brief introductory remarks, the students were divided into dyads and or triads in order to participate in an exercise called "The Gift" (Adapted from materials presented and shared at The Summer Institute for Intercultural Communication, 1994. See Appendix A). The Gift was the simple act of listening. Each member of the dyad or triad was encouraged to spend some time talking about his/her overseas experiences, while using the photograph or artifact as a trigger to past important memories. The other member or members encouraged the person by listening or asking some probing questions. Upon returning to the larger group, we discussed the commonalties in peoples' experiences.

The second exercise of the evening included a discussion of the "Ten Top Reentry Challenges," (LaBrack. See Appendix B). Following this discussion plans were established for future meetings.

Session II

The second session began by having students complete a series of sentence fragments regarding the experience of "Returning Home" (the source for this exercise is unknown. See Appendix C).

The second part of the session focused on defining and describing cognitive dissonance and the impact which it can have on human behavior (Martin, 1986/1994, p. 64). We discussed the need for adapting ways of thinking and behaving to accommodate former perceptions and new perceptions. To help demonstrate this concept students were asked to note their attitudes on two brief Likert type scales:

Attitudes Toward Luther College

Before Going Overseas

Negative_____Positive

After Going Overseas

Negative_____Positive

There was a dramatic shift to the left on the second scale. We then discussed Janet Bennett's position that culture and reentry shock are similar to other transitions in that they involve LOSS and CHANGE as in "Change of life style," "loss of familiar frames of reference," and "change of values associated with rapid social innovation..."(1977, p 45). The session ended with a discussion of McGrath's (1964, p. 137) description of "marginal man," who "is in transition between two cultures...."

Session III

The third session focused on developing a greater understanding of how the students were now perceiving their own culture. We began with a discussion of "How Others See America," (adapted from Kohls, 1984, pp. 32-33. See Appendix D). This exercise was followed by another which uses proverbs to assess how Americans view themselves (Kohls, pp.28-29. See Appendix E).

The exercises were used as triggers for a general discussion of the ways in which the students were experiencing their home culture. The discussion focused on the rushed pace of life, and the emphasis on material goods and consumption. The last segment asked the students to consider how they wanted to act as members of this culture.

Session IV

The final session was designed to reflect on personal growth and change. The primary focus was directed toward a checklist, "What Have I Gained from My Experience," Austin, 1986. See Appendix F). After discussing the checklist the conversation moved to celebrating growth and change, while acknowledging that we had to reach a point when it is time to go forth and deal with the daily issues of school and life within this culture

Conclusion

This was my first attempt at developing a reentry program, and by and large I was pleased with the results. The greatest weakness rested in having four sessions which occurred once a week. By the fourth session attendance had declined dramatically because most of the students were busy with traditional college activities. In the future I would schedule the Reentry program in two compact sessions of 2 1/2 hours each.

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Appendix A

The Gift

Materials: A photograph or piece of memorabilia which represents your overseas experience.

In dyads or triads introduce your overseas experience by talking about a photograph or piece of memorabilia, explaining why it is important to you.

The other member or members will provide the gift of listening by simply letting you talk about your experience. They may ask some probing questions to help you further develop your account of your experience.

After you have finished speaking you need to provide your gift of listening.

Appendix B

Ten Top Reentry Challenges

As Rated by University Students

There are lots of reasons to look forward to going home, but there are also a number of psychological, social, and cultural aspects which can prove difficult-- often because they are unanticipated. The following list was generated by interviewing students like you who have been through the experience and survived nicely. However, they say you should take the process seriously by being realistic, and think about it and your possible reactions. They offer the following thoughts on reentry for your consideration in the hope they will make your return both more enjoyable and productive.

1. **Boredom**

After all the newness and stimulation of your time abroad, a return to family, friends, and old routines (however nice and comforting) can seem very dull. It is natural to miss the excitement and challenges which characterize study in a foreign country, but it is up to you to find ways to overcome such negative reaction--remember a bored person is also boring.

2. **"No One Wants to Hear"**

One thing you can count on upon your return: no one will be as interested in hearing about your adventures and triumphs as you will be in telling them about those experiences. This is not a rejection of you or your achievements, but simply the fact that once they have heard the highlights, any further interest on your audiences' part is probably unlikely. Be realistic in your expectations of how fascinating your journey is going to be for everyone else. Be brief.

3. **You Can't Explain**

Even when given a chance to explain all the sights you saw and feelings you had while studying abroad, it is likely to be at least a bit frustrating to relay them coherently. It is very difficult to convey this kind of experience to people who do not have similar frames of reference or travel backgrounds, no matter how sympathetic they are as listeners. You can tell people about your trip, but you may fail to make them understand exactly how or why you felt a particular way. It's okay.

4. **Reverse "Home" Sickness**

Just as you probably missed home for a time after leaving the United States, it is just as natural to experience some "reverse" home sickness for the people, places, and things that you grew accustomed to as a student overseas. To an extent it can be reduced by writing letters, telephoning, and generally keeping contact, but feelings of loss are an integral part of international sojourns, and must be anticipated and accepted as a natural result of study abroad.

5. **Relationships Have Changed**

It is inevitable that when you return you will notice that some relationships with friends and family will have changed. Just as you have altered some of your ideas and attitudes while abroad, the people at home will have experienced some changes. These changes

may be positive or negative, but expecting that no change will have occurred is unrealistic. The best preparation is flexibility, openness, minimal preconceptions, and tempered optimism.

6. **People See "Wrong" Changes**
Sometimes people may concentrate on small alterations in your behavior or ideas and seem threatened or upset by them. Others may ascribe any "bad" traits to the influence of your time abroad. These incidents may be motivated by jealousy, fear, or feelings of superiority or inferiority. To avoid or minimize them it is necessary to monitor yourself and be aware of the reactions of those people around you, especially in the first few weeks of your return. This phase normally passes quickly, if you do nothing to confirm their stereotypes.

7. **People Misunderstand**
A few people will misunderstand your words or actions in such a way that communication is difficult. For example, what you may have come to think of as humor (particularly sarcasm, banter, etc.) and a way to show affection or establish conversation may not be seen as wit, but aggression or "showing off." Offers to help in the kitchen can be seen as criticism of food preparation, new clothing styles as provocative or inappropriate, references to a U.S. foreign country or language may be seen as boasting. Be aware of how you may look to others and how your behavior is likely to be interpreted.

8. **Feelings of Alienation/Critical "Eyes"**
Sometimes the reality of being back "home" is not as natural or enjoyable as the place you had constructed as your mental image. When real daily life is less enjoyable or more demanding than you remembered, it is natural to feel some alienation, see faults in the society you never noticed before, or even become quite critical of everyone and everything for a time. This is no different than when you first left home. Mental comparisons are fine, but keep them to yourself until you regain both your cultural balance and a balanced perspective.

9. **Inability to Apply New Knowledge and Skill**
Many returnees are frustrated by the lack of opportunity to apply newly gained social, linguistic, and practical coping skills that appear to be unnecessary or irrelevant. To avoid ongoing annoyance: adjust to reality as necessary, change what is possible, be creative, be patient and above all use all the cross-cultural adjustment skills you acquired abroad to assist your own reentry.

10. **Loss/Compartmentalization of Experience**
Being home, coupled with the pressures of job, family, and friends, often combine to make returnees worried that they somehow will "lose" the experience; somehow becoming compartmentalized like souvenirs or photo albums kept in a box and only occasionally taken out and looked at. You do not have to let that happen. Maintain your contacts. Talk to people who have shared experiences similar to yours. Practice your skills. Remember and honor both your hard work and the fun you had while abroad.

Compiled by Dr. Bruce LaBrack, School of International Studies, University of the Pacific for use by LASPAU for the CAMPUS Program

Appendix C

The thing I find most difficult to communicate to people about my time abroad is...

For me, my host country means...

The things I will miss about my host country are...

The most stressful part of leaving my host country was...

When I thought about returning, I felt... When I got home I found...

When I saw my family again, I...

I think my family expected me to...

The things I am happy to leave behind in my host country are...

I am looking forward to...

I hope my time abroad will (help, hinder, not affect me)...

What I really want to say when someone asks, "How was your 'trips'?" is...

The best thing about coming home is...

The best thing about returning to Luther is...

The hardest thing about coming home is...

The hardest thing about returning to Luther is...

I think my friends expect me to...

What my friends least understand about my experience is...

What my family least understands about my experience is...

What changed most about me from being abroad is...

Appendix D

1. **Visitor from India**:
". . . Americans seem to be in a perpetual hurry. Just watch the way they walk down the street. They never allow themselves the leisure to enjoy life; there are too many things to do. . ."

2. **Kenya**:
"Americans appear to us as rather distant. They are not really as close to other people -- even fellow Americans -- as Americans overseas tend to portray. It's almost as if an American says, 'I won't let you get too close to me;' it's like building a wall."

3. **Turkey**:
"Once we were out in a rural area in the middle of nowhere and saw an American come to a stop sign. Though he could see in both directions for miles and no traffic was coming, he still stopped!"

4. **Colombia**:
"The tendency in the U.S. to think that life is only work hits you in the face. Work seems to be the one type of motivation. . . "

5. **Indonesia**:
"In the U.S. everything has to be talked about and analyzed. Even the littlest thing has to be 'Why? Why? Why?' I get a headache from such persistent questions."

6. **Ethiopia**:
: . . . the American is very explicit; he wants a 'yes' or 'no'. If someone tries to speak figuratively, the American is confused."

7. **Iran**:
"The first time . . . my (American) professor told me, 'I don't know the answer, I will have to look it up,' I was shocked. I asked myself, 'Why is he teaching me?' In my country a professor would give a wrong answer rather than admit ignorance."

Appendix E

Cleanliness is next to godliness.
A penny saved is a penny earned.
Time is money.
Don't cry over spilt milk.
Waste not; want not.

Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealth, and wise.
God helps those who help themselves.
It is not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game.
A man's home is his castle.

No rest for the wicked.
You've made your bed, now sleep in it.
Don't count your chickens before they're hatched.
A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.
The squeaky wheel gets the grease.
Might makes right.

There's more than one way to skin a cat.
A stitch in time saves nine.
All that glitters is not gold.
Clothes make the man.

If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.
Take care of today and tomorrow will take care of itself.
Laugh and the world laughs with you; weep and you weep alone.

Appendix F

What Have I Gained From My Experience?

How have I changed from having been abroad?

Place a check ( ) by each change that has occurred in you.

____ I have improved my ability to speak a foreign language.

____ I am more knowledgeable about another culture and lifestyle.

____ I have a greater ability to empathize with others, that is, to put myself in their place when making judgements.

____ I can accept failures and shortcomings in myself more easily.

____ I understand more fully my own strengths and weaknesses.

____ I am more confident and positive when meeting new people.

____ I am more confident and assertive when facing new situations.

____ I have a greater capacity to accept differences in others.

____ I am more able to share my thoughts and feelings with others, and to be open when others wish to share theirs with me.

____ I have more curiosity about and respect for new ideas.

____ I have a clearer notion of what I will do with my life.

____ I am more flexible and able to adjust to changes in others.

____ I am more tolerant of ambiguous situations, that is, of situations that are confusing and open to differing interpretations.

____ I have more ability to see myself objectively, that is, to see my own day-to-day problems in a broader, more realistic context.

____ I am more deeply committed to an idea, cause, or goal.

____ I have increased my preserverance and self-discipline.

____ I am more willing to strive and sacrifice in order to do well in my studies at school or in independent learning projects.

____ I have a greater sense of responsibility for other people.

____ I am more able to express deep emotions freely.

____ I am more able to ask for and receive help from others.

____ I have greater willingness to take on roles and tasks to which I am unaccustomed.

____ I have increased my capacity to experiment and take risks.

____ I am more able to accept as valid other values and lifestyles.

____ I have a deeper understanding of (if not necessarily commitment to) the values and lifestyle of my native community.

____ I am more aware of the opportunities in life that are open to me.

____ I feel greater respect and appreciation for my natural family.

____ I am more independent in my relations with family and friends.

____ I feel that I need fewer friends but deeper (more intimate and more trusting) friendships.

____ I am more aware of the way I use and structure time.

____ I have greater capacity to profit by my mistakes.

____ I am more interested in and capable of laying long range plans.

____ I am more determined to fully develop my skills and talents.

____ I feel a greater need to have diverse experiences and friends.

____ I am more balanced in my judgements, that is, less likely to judge things as "good" or "bad," "right" or "wrong."

____ I am more likely to do things spontaneously, that is, to do things without undue concern about possible consequences.

____ I am more capable of solving life's day-to-day problems.

____ I think more critically; I am more discriminating and skeptical.

____ I have improved observation skills.

____ I need more time to be alone.

____ I am more confident about the decisions I make.

____ I feel more surely that common bonds unite all human beings.

____ I have a deeper understanding of the problems and issues that confront all human beings on this planet.

____ I have greater awareness of political, economic, and social events occurring around the world.

Put an extra check ( ) by the two or three changes that are the most significant for you.